Introduction

Honesty is essential. We don't have this honesty [as a concept] in Kazakhstan, in the public sphere, and there is never sincerity [here]. It [lack of sincerity] happens because everything that the regime [*vlast'*] transmits [in its messages] – there is no honesty in that. And in general, people got used to the fact that honesty as such does not exist [in Kazakhstan].[1]

Nothing is more characteristic of the totalitarian movements in general and of the quality of fame of their leaders in particular than the starting swiftness with which they are forgotten and the startling ease with which they can be replaced.[2]

In reality, Qazaq Koktemi [the Kazakh Spring] is more about the Prague Spring and about the fact that spring is, first of all, the period of renewal. [President] Nazarbayev left in spring … When I say that I do not believe in revolution, I am not saying that we should not protest at rallies [*vyhodit' na mitingi*] – rallies are important and necessary. I should underline that I said this [laughs]. I believe in rallies [*ya veru v mitingi*] because rallies are the only [means] that we have left right here, right now. All I am saying is that we cannot change the whole system in one second; until we reach the critical mass, and even then, we need to understand what we are doing it [revolution] for. Because that same Kyrgyz [revolutions] or Ukrainian scenario [Euromaidan] simply does not apply or fit us, *we need to find our own path to how we will do it* [revolution].[3]

In early January 2022, the oil-rich state of Kazakhstan saw the biggest mass protests in its recent history and was shocked again when the protests were violently repressed. Thousands of people marched in the streets demanding political changes, the resignation of the government,

[1] Interview with an anonymous Oyan, Qazaqstan and Qazaq Koktemi movement activist, 22 July 2020.
[2] Arendt 2007: 407.
[3] Interview with Assem Zhapisheva, Oyan, Qazaqstan, and Qazaq Koktemi movement activist, 24 June 2020.

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the return of the democratic constitution, and the improvement of economic conditions. The reason for the protests was not just the hike in LPG gas prices as many in the foreign media reported. This was only a trigger, a bitter joke that, in the gas- and oil-rich country, gas prices depended on corrupt networks of export and import controlled by the highest echelons of the autocrats. The disjointed groups of protestors occupied central squares in almost all the major cities of Kazakhstan, a vast country whose borders stretch from Russia to China. The crowds of protestors chanted 'Leave, old man!' (*Shal, ket!*) at Nursultan A. Nazarbayev, who remained the self-proclaimed leader, the Father of the Nation (*elbasy*), and controlled the authoritarian regime in Kazakhstan for more than thirty years. He killed off the most viable challengers to his power, co-opted or repressed those who were less dangerous to his rule, and suppressed any popular uprising, often leaving a bloody trace and dozens of dead protestors. The tragedy of Zhanaozen protests in 2011, where officially seventeen people died but unofficially many more deaths, tortures in prison, and grave injuries were unaccounted for, was a case in point. Many Kazakhstanis still remembered the horrible scenes of riot police shooting unarmed people in this small town in western Kazakhstan, the heart of the oil and gas industry, in December 2011. Eyewitnesses used their smartphones to film the scenes, and the videos quickly spread on social media. Eleven years later, the protest started off again in Zhanaozen. But this time, people in every major city all across the country answered the call to stand in solidarity with Zhanaozen and the start of 2022 marked the biggest protest and one of the most tragic days of Kazakhstan's modern history.

The January 2022 protests, also known as Bloody January (*Qandy Qantar*) claimed more than 238 lives when Nazarbayev's successor, Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev, announced that he had given the order 'to shoot without warning' and called many ordinary citizens among the protestors 'terrorists' who threatened peace and stability in the country.[4] Before we get into the complex story of what the Bloody January protests really represented – according to various commentators a failed revolution to remove the corrupt autocratic regime or a failed coup from rival intra-elite competitors – we first need to

[4] www.wsj.com/articles/kazakhstan-leader-gives-security-forces-order-to-shoot-without-warning-11641548642.

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dwell on how the *political* was understood in Nazarbayev's Kazakhstan.

Nursultan A. Nazarbayev, an old Soviet-made politician, 'the party's soldier' as he once called himself, ruled Kazakhstan from 1989, while it was still part of the Soviet Union, up until January 2022, when he finally announced that he was stepping down fully from all of his political positions amid the mass protests. The streets spoke: 'Leave, old man' (*Shal, ket!*) was a ubiquitous slogan of the mass protests. Nazarbayev's career was no different from any textbook autocrat's – he quickly took over control of key state institutions, co-opted rival elites, staged and rigged elections where he won over 90 per cent of the vote, and at the end of his career engaged in a ridiculous cult of personality, issuing a series of films about his life from childhood in a poor family to his role as a young communist leader and to what he thought was the throne of an irreplaceable dictator. He failed in many things along the way, and one of them was that no matter how hard he tried, he could not find the secret to immortality. Hysteria around his succession took over Kazakhstan in the early and turbulent 2000s with the rise of the young technocratic opposition, the Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan movement (DVK), who once served as Nazarbayev's loyalists and were an integral part of his regime. Young economists, engineers, ministers, media managers, and charismatic mid-level politicians announced that they wanted to free Kazakhstan from autocracy and change the regime from within. They too failed, and the movement quickly disintegrated into smaller units of intra-regime political opposition. But their quick and spectacular moment of resisting Nazarbayev opened up Pandora's box for the last decade of the bloodied dictator's rule.

The truth was in plain sight – the aging dictator was a ticking bomb ready to explode the whole country. Geopolitical rifts that followed Kazakhstan's history for centuries continued to press the issue even more. On the one side, there was Russia, with its bloodshed in the first two Chechen wars and the rise of Vladimir Putin in the early 2000s. On the other side, there was China, which required sustainable diplomatic and economic relations but posed a continuous danger. The events of 9/11 brought more American influence to the region as a whole and put further pressure on Nazarbayev to democratize. The question of succession filled the air with unbearable heaviness. People discussed it openly, as it posed a lot of internal threats – from intra-elite conflict

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to potential civil war. Nazarbayev often dodged the question of his potential successor, claiming that he was in good health and did not plan to depart. This prompted even more rumours, anecdotes, and conspiracy theories about the dictator's health. At one point, conspiracy theories reached boiling point, alleging that there was no place on Nazarbayev's aging body that was not affected by cancer, as rumours spoke of all types of diagnoses, none of them officially acknowledged or disproved. Questions of Nazarbayev's succession would have caused even more bizarre developments than serious media discussions, books published on potential scenarios, and coffee-shop buzz about what healer Nazarbayev used to prolong his life – except that his successor was there all along.

Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev, a product of Soviet elite distillation, was the son of a relatively famous writer, and family ties paved his way to a successful career as a Soviet diplomat. He studied at the elite MGIMO institute in Moscow, spoke six languages (among them Chinese, which was quite handy), and travelled the world on different diplomatic postings. In the early 2000s, when the DVK movement announced their programme of democratization, Tokayev was prime minister and the first person from the regime to denounce them publicly. In breaking-news style, he spoke on state television asking President Nazarbayev to sack the government and eliminate many of the DVK leaders' positions, essentially throwing them out of the regime and leaving them with no political capacity. This historic event put Tokayev on the map as Nazarbayev's biggest loyalist, as a person without a political 'team' lobbying for its group interests,[5] and as his future successor. Tokayev also gained the colloquial name of *Kinder Surprise*, a type of toy soldier who could deliver any action, any speech

[5] Most of the Kazakhstani political commentators continuously viewed the autocratic regime as a conglomerate of different elite groups or 'teams', for example, Massimov's team, Tasmagambetov's team, and so on. By this logic, each team had strong group ties and was collectively fighting for a better position within the regime. However, this often overlooked powerful loners such as Tokayev, who refused to join any of the teams or groups of influence or to connect with anyone in the long term and instead focused on sustaining his career and loyalty only to Nazarbayev. The focus on the strict collective interest of the teams or groups of influence also overlooked the fluidity of these relations, where not every allegiance was set in stone and where each member could easily switch teams or leave the team altogether when they felt it would better serve their interests.

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to protect the autocratic regime, even if it went against the country's interests.

In late March 2019, Nazarbayev, the eighty-year-old dictator, appeared on state television with an unexpected speech.[6] With his usual mechanical voice and expressionless face,[7] he announced that he was stepping down from the presidency without citing any clear reason. He mentioned that 'it wasn't an easy decision' and that he was happy that he could serve the country for thirty years as its first (post-soviet) president.[8] Nazarbayev announced that, according to the constitution, the speaker of the senate of the parliament would take over the position of interim president before the new presidential elections. Was it any surprise that Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev, the lone loyalist to Nazarbayev, was serving as the speaker of the senate right at this time and that he was not elected to this position by the citizens but was appointed to this key position by Nazarbayev himself? Nazarbayev paved the way to the consolidation of his rule and wanted a smooth transition first to Tokayev and then to a successor from his closest circle, potentially even a family member. After all, he had a huge family; but too many of his relatives were entangled in corruption scandals or did not have any political capital or popularity among the voters. Neither did Tokayev. But he was loyal, and loyalty is the main currency in Nazarbayev's supra-presidential system. This move allowed Nazarbayev to remain in power while changing the guard in the

[6] In this narrative of aging Soviet-educated dictators, 'state television' is an actor in its own right. A handful of well-sponsored television channels dominate the Kazakh airwaves and are available for free across the whole country. In the age of social media, Netflix, and mobile Internet, few people of the younger generation watch television, but as in Russia, where state television dominates the older age group, the Nazarbayev regime was never too quick to write off the powerful tool that state television presents in terms of propaganda. The total Internet blackout during the January 2022 protests made state television the only viable channel of information for many citizens for a short period of time of less than a week. In times of crisis, state television plays a crucial role in brainwashing and propagating regime-led ideas.

[7] Some commentators stated that Nazarbayev in his speech sounded like the late Soviet leader Brezhnev, who also stayed in power until an advanced age, and like aging Russian leader Boris Yeltsin when he resigned in 1999.

[8] Nazarbayev took special pride in his status as first president, which was mentioned in all official documents and commemorative rituals of his legacy. A lot of his critics claimed that Alash Orda leaders of the early 1900s pro-independence movement, and particularly Alikhan Bokeikhanov, were the first presidents of Kazakhstan.

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institutions. When he stepped down as the president, he still remained a lifetime chairman of the country's security council and 'advisor' to the president and the parliament. He moved to the Library of the First President in Astana, the capital city that was swiftly renamed Nur-Sultan, and continued to control the web of autocratic governance as a shadow leader. This was a period of dual leadership – of President Tokayev and of the 'librarian' (*bibliotekar'*), as Nazarbayev was dubbed colloquially.

Nazarbayev was often called a 'wise leader' by some of the sympathetic commentators in the region. The myth of his politics of stability and multi-vector foreign policy sustained the facade of a successful dictator, while people inside the country suffered from widespread corruption, lack of effective governance, and the absence of viable channels for electoral participation. There is no such thing as a successful dictator, and Nazarbayev was no exception to the rule. Nazarbayev carefully calculated and controlled the threat to his rule from within the regime by co-opting and enriching his closest competitors – Imangali Tasmagambetov, Umirzak Shukeev, Karim Massimov, and others. He chose a successor who could not threaten his position as the Leader of the Nation (the self-fashioned title of *elbasy* that he adopted). Nazarbayev created the political field in Kazakhstan around the closed-off elitist circle of the regime and imbued it with so much power over decision-making that he overlooked the non-elite players who could easily disrupt the balance of the regime. One of the biggest mistakes he made was also to believe that he still retained wide popular support. Zhanaozen in 2011, street protests against local currency devaluation in 2014, land protests in 2016, and mothers' protests in early 2019 were symptoms of the imbalance in relations between regime and society that he believed he had locked down so well. The mass protests of January 2022 were a long time in the making but in the end represented a countrywide rage against the dictator and the corrupt system he had built.

The protestors were not stopped by the cold winter days of early January 2022. They openly demanded the complete removal of Nazarbayev and his authoritarian elites. Protestors raged against any physical reminder of Nazarbayev's cult of personality – they ripped off the street signs with his name on them, set the official party buildings bearing his name (the Nur-Otan party) on fire, and even toppled his monument in Taldyqorgan, the regional hub of Nazarbayev loyalists.

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In the chaos of violent mobs and burning buildings, crowds of people cheered the downfall of the statues and chanted '*Shal, ket!*' – Leave, old man! Go away, Nazarbayev! National flags waved above the squares, and activists, peaceful protestors of *Qandy Qantar* (Bloody January) quickly wrote down political demands – we want democratization! It was a revolution that took to the streets, but it was also a revolution that was quickly stolen.

Bloodshed followed instantly, and the protests were violently suppressed at the expense of hundreds of civilian deaths. As the dead bodies of protestors piled up on the streets, the incumbent elites panicked. President Tokayev immediately sacked the government, removed Nazarbayev from his lifelong position in the security council, and introduced curfews to fight the alleged 'terrorist attack'. The regime could not afford to call the events of Bloody January 'protests' because the violence was so unprecedented – and because this same brutality and violence demonstrated the failures of the fake political transition to the post-Nazarbayev era after 2019. So President Tokayev claimed that the insurgencies were organized by 'specially trained groups' – the claim that is yet to be proved by a transparent investigation that many activists demand till this day. The regime's violent suppression of its citizens with the help of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) troops, among them 3,000 Russian elite forces, contrasted with the legendary photograph of the 6 January Almaty protestors' handmade banner: 'We are NOT terrorists, we are ordinary people.' The early January days of violence coincided with a mass communication shutdown that echoed *1984*, where the only source of information was the state television channel asking citizens to remain indoors. Propaganda overlapped with fake news and conspiracies that quickly spread. The country, so dependent on its internet connection, was cut off from all forms of communication apart from occasional mobile coverage for days until 'order was restored'. However, as the this book will demonstrate, the January 2022 protests were only possible because of the structural changes that the Kazakh Spring brought with its three-year-long protests, contestations, and change of discourse since March 2019. The story of January 2022 cannot be understood without the continuous cycles of contention that preceded it and that allowed the possibility of a radically different future, where fears of repression could be diminished to the point that people normalized the thought that

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protests were possible. Protests became part of the people openly speaking up against the regime, criticizing presidents, and demanding further democratization.

The Argument

How can a deinstitutionalized protest movement disrupt a solidified, repressive, and extremely resilient authoritarian regime? In this book, I argue that often unexpected ways of political contention successfully shape the regime, its elites, and its forms of oppression even under the most authoritarian contexts and repressions. In doing so, various protest groups can push the limits of the regime's established political rules. The tug of war that emerges is between the authoritarian regime (including its competing elites, law-enforcement apparatus, and bureaucracy) and the field of protesters. The latter may not always represent a unified party or leadership but must be united by the same values and/or political goals. The success of the field of protesters depends on their ability to disintegrate regime capacity by attacking the main facets of authoritarian politics – staged and uncompetitive elections, laws that expand presidential powers, and the unified single-party approach of the authoritarian leadership.[9]

In this book, I use the context and temporal development of the Kazakh Spring protests (2019–) to focus on how the interplay between the repressive regime and pro-democracy protest movements defines and shapes both. Combining original interview data, digital ethnography, and contentious politics studies, I argue that the new generation of activists – the likes of Instagram political influencers and renowned public intellectuals – can delegitimize and counter one of the most resilient authoritarianisms and inspire the mass protests that none of the formalized opposition ever imagined possible in Kazakhstan. The Kazakh Spring activists managed to do so by radically changing the limits of what is possible within the established frames of regime opposition, which mainly relied on formalization and lack of electoral participation, and regime–society relations, where the regime failed to deliver on its promises of economic prosperity for all. In doing so, the Kazakh Spring formed as a new political field where different actors

[9] See Bunce and Wolchik 2009; but see also Isaacs 2010 on the importance of the one-party structure of authoritarian rule in Kazakhstan.

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sought their own positions and discourses that managed to unleash the potential for major contention between society and the regime.

The book's biggest contribution is the framework of the formation of political fields under autocracies where contentions can open space for new fields beyond the rules established by the authoritarian regimes. These new fields successfully manage to produce new actors, new strategies, and new imaginations of the limits of the political. The testing of this framework in different authoritarian regimes can result in diverging outcomes – a more repressive response to dissent (Belarus), the regime's search for alternative legitimation and enemy-image construction at home and abroad (broadly speaking, Putin's politics in contemporary Russia before and during its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022), or the regime's total collapse and the re-emergence of new forms of authoritarian politics where the regime is openly responding to and is shaped by this new political field (Kazakhstan). This book provides a very detailed and chronological approach to explaining how this framework worked out and shaped Kazakhstani politics, leading to the political demise of the country's long-term dictator Nursultan A. Nazarbayev. His once-uncontested and solidified rule defined the very principle of doing politics and positioning oneself within the regime in Kazakhstan (Cummings 2006a, 2006b; Dave 2007; Fauve 2015; Isaacs 2010a, 2010b, 2011, 2013, 2014; Laruelle 2004, 2014, 2016, 2018, 2020, 2021, 2022; Laruelle, Royce, and Beyssembayev 2019). His once-omnipotent cult came crashing down with the wave of discontent that had built up over the years and culminated in the tragic but also important mass protests in January 2022. The book provides a chronological and rich empirical explanation of what led to these tectonic shifts in one of the most resilient and durable authoritarian regimes and theorizes what we can learn from the complexity of regime–society relations in non-democratic contexts.

This book is the first attempt to elucidate and illustrate the Kazakh Spring – Qazaq Koktemi[10] – as a field that has changed the way the political is understood and practised in Kazakhstan. In doing so, it

[10] Qazaq Koktemi is the original Kazakh name for the Kazakh Spring, and it is the way my interlocutors referred to it. Often in our interviews they would just say 'Koktem' (spring). I use this concept and its English translation, the Kazakh Spring, interchangeably in the text to keep the original concept unseparated from its translation.

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offers a contribution and rich contextualization to the growing 'living archive of social movements'[11] and unravels the complex working of protest movements in societies with heightened authoritarianisms. The theoretical framing of the conceptualization of political fields and regime–society relations allows us to test the Kazakh Spring as a political field where different actors – from pro-democracy movements to queer feminists – find a space to contest the regime and the dictator. The famous slogan 'Leave, old man!' (*Shal, ket!*) translates well across these different groups and actors, across class, gender, ethnic, and other identifiable distinctions. In this book, I argue that the Kazakh Spring (Qazaq Koktemi) was able to shape the popular ideas and concepts that citizens had about state, regime, and their own position and participation in this paradigm of power relations.

The only way to achieve 'participation' or open engagement with the regime was at the level of unsanctioned activism or through the type of political acts conceived by the ruling regime as 'illegal' – unsanctioned rallies, unapproved protest-art actions, and subsequent court hearings and trials of activists as a result of these actions. In other words, the activists, and the authoritarian regime, had to engage on the level of confrontations where the Qazaq Koktemi activists questioned the whole paradigm of the 'rules of the game' set out by the regime. These rules are inevitably illiberal and authoritarian, even though they include a sophisticated and complex web of legal rules, law-enforcement institutionalization, and the forms and styles of authoritarian governance. By the last, I mean the type of systemic political decision-making where key powerful positions are occupied by the regime elites according to their 'selection' rather than 'election'. Thus, the focus on the interplay between the repressive regime and democratization struggles allows us to highlight and carve out processes, practices, styles, and discourses of the regime and its effects as well as of the new type of activism and confrontation of the Kazakh Spring phenomenon.

The key aim of this book is to focus on ways of analysing power, and I see the root in finding the rules that govern its existence – its edifice, practice, discourses, understanding (Glasius 2018), and its meaning as well as its effects on people (especially when thinking about authoritarian power). Thus, my thinking on authoritarian power pushes me to

[11] Gómez-Barris 2018: 2.

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encapsulate it in the genealogy of the regime and the specific rules of the regime's existence and practice, to see how this power is contested and questioned. This is why Kazakh Spring's approach to the deinstitutionalization of their activities and the consistent refusal to formalize in the political field where authoritarian regime rules predominate is so important but also possibly dangerous. Deinstitutionalization of movements and actors strives for further democratization but also can influence spontaneity of activism and protesting repertoires that other actors (e.g., the regime) continuously appropriate in their own interests. For example, the rise of the traditionalist voices on social media who attack and harass LGBT activists or their agenda is a key example of how this is problematic.

I am inspired and moved by the necessity to provide rich answers to the questions of *what* happens when new protest waves emerge and *how* these waves happen and change political dynamics. In doing so, the book contributes to the call to study everyday authoritarianism ethnographically and detail the dynamic complexities (see Glasius 2018; Przeworski 2022; Wedeen 2019) that play a crucial role in routinizing authoritarian norms (Wedeen's work is an exemplary testament to that) and making them even more powerful. Under these conditions, activists and scholars must engage with questions of how we can reshape the normative approach to authoritarianisms and pave the way to further democratization even under the extremely difficult conditions faced by civil society and the totality of repressive tactics. My research on emergent protests in post-Nazarbayev Kazakhstan, in particular, was guided by the following questions: what did Qazaq Koktemi bring to the political dynamics of Kazakhstani authoritarian contexts that was not there before? How did Qazaq Koktemi shape and how does it continue to shape and rethink the idea of the state, the regime, and its influence over citizens?

In this book, I demonstrate (1) how the protest wave reveals the hidden or less visible ways of doing authoritarian politics under certain regimes; (2) how these new protest waves emerge and what makes them possible; (3) what are the ways, contexts, and other local factors that make possible such radically visible and sudden waves of protest as those of the Kazakh Spring; (4) how relations and discourses are produced and worked in this particular field; and, finally, (5) how this protest wave pushes the regime to change its tactics. I believe that the example of the Kazakh Spring (Qazaq Koktemi), as a field that has

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changed the way the political is understood and practised in Kazakhstan, is a very useful and illustrative manifestation of this change.

The Kazakh Spring – or Qazaq Koktemi in the local, Kazakh language – is not an identifiable party or movement, but rather it kicked off as a slogan, a hashtag, and the overall meaning-making theme of the protest that started in the spring of 2019. It represents the complexity of the important temporal divide in the Kazakhstani political field and later, its reconfiguration. It separates the before and after and provides an important ideological and forward-looking demarcation for all the movements, people, and discourses that became part of it. In other words, Qazaq Koktemi is a new field, a space where meaning, positions, discourses, and knowledge are produced, reproduced, circulated, and contested, and where actors are positioned with their share of different capitals (economic, cultural, symbolic, social, etc.). I use a Bourdieusian understanding of the field as a terrain of struggles, as a 'network, or configuration, of objective relations between positions' (Wacquant and Bourdieu 1992: 97). Bourdieu's definition of the field allows us to analyse the positions and practices of different actors and to introduce different characters engaged in the contention – movements, activists, journalists, and regime extensions such as the police. Bourdieu argued that:

> These positions are objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants, agents or institutions, by their present and potential situation (*situs*) in the structure of the distribution of species of power (or capital) whose possession commands access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field, as well as by their objective relation to other positions (domination, subordination, homology, etc.).[12]

As a field, Qazaq Koktemi facilitates the production of a more or less coherent meaning and values that define all of the people and movements that operate within this field and claim its meaning, status, and positionality. The Kazakh Spring can also be conceptualized as a new part of the civil sphere – 'a world of values and institutions that generate the capacity for social criticism and democratic integration at the same time'. In doing so, the civil sphere 'relies on solidarity, on feelings for others whom we do not know but whom we respect out of

[12] Wacquant and Bourdieu 1992: 97.

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principle, not experience, because of our putative commitment to a common secular faith' (Alexander 2006: 4).

Thinking of the Kazakh Spring as a shift in doing the political but also a civil sphere imbued with solidarity and a common call against injustices is a lot closer to its nature and origin than evaluating it according to models and statistics of a 'successful revolution'. Such 'success' usually implies the forceful removal of the autocratic leader, that is, the president, but not always the removal of the regime and its meaning-making and normative infrastructure. And this is what the activists of the Kazakh Spring acutely understand – they are in this revolutionary moment for the long run. They understand that it will take more than just defining the post-Nazarbayev era and dismantling his cult of personality, as happened during the January 2022 protests and its aftermath. What activists of the Kazakh Spring acutely understood even before the mass protests was that it would take a radical change of the 'system': redefining power relations and the understanding of *vlast'* – the regime politics and the regime's field of power. The Kazakh Spring is about protest and framing collective solidarities that take a long time to build, but also, more importantly, it is about establishing and nourishing a pro-democratic value system that many of my respondents see as the only way out of the authoritarian limbo.

There are a lot of links between the Arab Spring and the Kazakh Spring, even though Kazakhstani activists themselves speak about a concept of 'spring' that is closer to the Prague Spring. My respondents among the many makers of the Kazakh Spring view it as a process of gradual liberalization, with further politicization and involvement of different societal groups who can engage in the processes of political meaning-making alternative to the dominant authoritarian regime. As such, it is a very inclusive process that invites many different groups and ideologically divided collectives. The purpose of the Kazakh Spring is to incentivize political change and allow further democratization while at the same time giving a platform to a plurality of voices, opinions, and plans for change. Over the course of my study, I have seen how many people get involved in this overall process, feeling that this is a way for them to speak up and be seen, be heard. At the same time, many of them sustain their institutional identities as part of the projects, communities, and, in some cases, even political parties from which they emerge. This fluidity and pluriversal approach to doing the political allows the avoidance of ethno-lingual and class-based distinctions that came to

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the fore in how the regime assigned blame for the January 2022 mass protests, when a lot of the unofficial discourse covered it as 'Kazakh-speaking lumpen destroying Almaty's city centre'.[13] Kazakh Spring activists aim to push the agenda beyond just the central cities of Almaty and Astana, as many of the activists themselves come from various regions of the country; for years, they aimed for protest to take over each regional city and town.

The Kazakh Spring is also a prolonged process, and it is still continuing at the time of this manuscript's completion. However, one similarity with the Arab Spring is striking – when dictators fall, the dictatorships endure; revolutions emerge as a fervent movement but then are stolen by new dictators who are sometimes even worse than their toppled predecessors. The complete fall of Nazarbayev after the January 2022 protests did not mean the complete fall of the regime. Russian troops landing in Kazakhstan as part of the unprecedented CSTO operation to suppress the mass protests gave Tokayev important leeway to establish his rule firmly and without the old agreements binding it to Nazarbayev and his circle of elites. Tokayev managed to imprison some of Nazarbayev's old elites, along with hundreds of ordinary citizens who were tortured by the police to 'confess' to their supposed terrorist acts and confirm the regime's dominant narrative about the protests. But Tokayev failed to prosecute Nazarbayev and his family, even though he openly announced the return of all the assets the family of the first president stole from the country (making them billionaires). Just like the verse of the new popular song by Daiynball, 'shal kettip bara zhatyr [barattyr] … Tigr, diplomat, orator. Qazaq eline plus bir dictator!' – 'The old man (*shal*) is gone, Tiger [the term local propaganda used for Tokayev after the January protests], diplomat, orator. The Kazakh people are getting one more dictator!'

[13] Official rhetoric still largely places the protestors in the southern part of the country (where violence prevailed) within the organized crime or 'extremists and terrorists' discourse. In late spring and summer 2022, state media started broadcasting documentary films about looters and criminals who took over central cities, most notably Almaty's rich central quarters, and in the interviews with supposed eyewitnesses strengthened the narrative that these were internal migrants (*prieszhie*) from nearby villages who aimed to destroy the city. Scandal broke out when one of the local media rumored that the editors called the Almaty protestors a slur denigrating rural ethnic Kazakhs, referring to the 'riot of the Kazakh lumpen'. Many civic activists, including those from the Oyan, Qazaqstan movement, opposed and criticized these narratives.

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The Interplay between the Regime and the New Protest Field

Many commentators stressed the dependent temporality connecting the resignation of the long-term dictator and the emergence of the new wave of contentious politics (Ibadildin and Pisareva 2020; Tutumlu and Rustemov 2021, for example). But this dependent temporality needs to be addressed with a nuance of how and why Qazaq Koktemi became a *new* phenomenon in these contentious politics.

The classical definition and contextualization of social movements that emerge argue that 'contentious politics is triggered when changing political opportunities and constraints create incentives for social actors who lack resources on their own' (Tarrow 1998: 2). And this in part explains why Qazaq Koktemi was confused with the social movements it has inspired, namely, the Oyan, Qazaqstan (Wake up, Kazakhstan) movement, which no doubt emerged at the moment of political opportunity but was embedded in the networks provided by the Qazaq Koktemi (I discuss this process in detail in Chapter 2).

In this book, I argue that the redrawing of political opportunities after President Nazarbayev's departure in March 2019 were indeed so significant that it allowed the complete rethinking and reshaping of the previous political rules of the game when it came to contentious politics. However, the old guard of political opposition to the regime and the groups and movements that had been in operation since the late 1980s were not ready to adapt to these new conditions. And thus they failed in the face of the tremendous window of opportunity (the formal departure of Nazarbayev) for which they all had waited so long. In these conditions, previously unknown young activists, now politically engaged actors, entered the scene to (1) rethink the limits and discourses of political competition while addressing the deeply seated framework of regime–society relations (instead of the state–society relations in democracies); (2) challenge and expose the lines of difference between the state and the regime, which often are perceived as one and the same; and, essentially, (3) change the rules of the game within the political field by influencing the change of values and engaging more citizens in the protest movements. This is why Qazaq Koktemi is a completely new but also a very important and innovative phenomenon in the studies of Kazakhstani politics and contentious politics under authoritarianism in general. It sheds more light on how, while the elites within the regime regrouped and focused too much on the

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internal logics of regime survival from within,[14] they did not anticipate how this regrouping left the thriving field 'below' the intra-elite level ready to engage in this regrouping of power positions as well. In other words, the ruling elites of the Nazarbayev regime were too preoccupied with what would have happened to them and their positions within the political field of this same regime rather than thinking outside its limits and looking beyond the field they were engaged in.

This is what I call *authoritarian myopia* – the inability of authoritarian elites to adequately assess or even make sense of the social reality beyond their own position in the field that is the intra-elite authoritarian regime – for example, all those political elites participating in the actual political decision-making whether through formal or informal channels of doing politics.[15] Driven by the intensity of their competition within this field, they are unable to respond to the calls or claims of citizens who supposedly provide the capacity for these elites to occupy the positions of the field they find themselves in. In other words, the

[14] For the classic definition of the fragility of authoritarian rule shaken by intra-elite coups and vicious competition, see Svolik 2012; Bernhard, Edgell, and Lindberg 2016.

[15] I am a proponent of viewing the regime on different levels of its power operation, which I conceptualize in separate fields. In my previous work, I discuss the term nationalizing regimes to demonstrate how the highest political decision-making in any given state and regarding the nationalizing process of nation-building happens within the frames of the political and ruling elites, who find the discursive consensus on the main facets of this field (Kudaibergenova 2020). In this particular case of authoritarian myopia, I am conceptualizing the regime as a field of ruling elites (whether officially in political office or not) who have actual power (within their own limits, of course) over the political decision-making in the country. In another instance, I conceptualize the regime as an overall discursive field governing actions through the production of meaning, authoritative discourses, and appropriate behaviour (Kudaibergenova 2021). When talking about formal and informal channels of doing politics, I agree with scholars such as Juan Linz (2000), who conceptualized various types of authoritarian regimes where political decision-making is not always transparent or done entirely through formal procedures. This does not mean a complete disregard of the formal institutions that dictators need to maintain their rule (Gandhi 2008); rather, it positions power relations within the regime in a more nuanced way, where levels of power and decision-making are spread in the locus of power (e.g., family, dictator's closest circle) and then only in distinct institutions. There is a very strong school of neopatrimonialism led by Henry Hale in post-Soviet politics, for example, that discusses autocratic regimes as patron–client relations (see Hale 2014, for example). For me, the terminology of regime and power relations is close to the patron–client paradigm but is also expandable in the form of discursive power and competition.

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people and the citizens provide the capacity for the existence of the political community known as the Republic of Kazakhstan, which becomes the host for the field known as the Nazarbayev regime, where each of the bargaining political elites found themselves on the eve of 19 March 2019 when their patron officially resigned from his position.

Unlike the elites within his own regime, Nursultan A. Nazarbayev was acutely aware of the necessity of responding to the social reality in which he operated as the president. Even though elections were staged and rigged throughout all of Kazakhstan's independent history (see Isaacs 2011, for example), and thus citizens were deprived of their direct right to choose those who govern them, Nazarbayev was aware of the importance of listening to the voices of these deprived citizens. The Archive of the First President of Kazakhstan in Almaty has a collection of historical files and minutes of the meetings held in the presidential administration in the 1990s. This was the time when Nazarbayev formed a number of internal committees (most of which still followed the Soviet model of institutions and approach to dealing with the population)[16] and stressed the importance of surveying social attitudes and catching the waves of social unrest and discontent. Piles of carefully drafted reports and surveys circulated in the administration, often with Nazarbayev's personal comments and notes on the pages. Take, for example, the archival report Nursultan A. Nazarbayev received and then addressed to Nurtay Abykayev[17] about the 'Socio-Political situation in the Republic' on 5 February 1991, where he evaluated the situation with intra-ethnic relations as 'ambiguous' and thus problematic:

> If the working people [*trudyashiesya*] in the absolute majority are guided by their everyday experiences and are included to resolve the arising contradictions by increasing the common welfare [*obshee blagososotoyanie*], on the basis of the good internationalist traditions that have developed in Kazakhstan, then intelligentsia, especially those who are part of certain political movements, often dramatize them. Here is where the myths about certain 'downtrodden' nations are coming from, and here is where [other rumors] about the mass outflow of the so-called Russian-speaking

[16] On the persistence of Sovietized approaches to politics, see Tutumlu and Imyarova 2021.

[17] Former head of the National Committee for Security (KNB).

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population from Kazakhstan, the discrimination of the rights of the indigenous people [come from]. But, as sociological poll results demonstrate, the percentage of those dissatisfied with the living [conditions] in Kazakhstan according to these reasons [mentioned above], is very low (from 2% to 7%). At the same time, the number of those who wish to leave the republic exceeds the number of those dissatisfied [*nedovol'nie*]. The ecological state of different regions, the deterioration of the financial situations of some of the categories of the population, the fear of unemployment and of interethnic conflicts [happening in] neighboring republics and other reasons play an important role here [in the decisions for outmigration].[18]

Whether it was in President Nazarbayev's speeches,[19] in his programmes and initiatives,[20] or in his internal communication within the presidential administration (available to us through the archival minutes), it was fashioned as if all of these discourses represented his personal touch and omnipresent watchful eye. President Nazarbayev became the prime locus of the nationalizing regime I described elsewhere as 'personalized'[21] or Nazarbayevite, and he created the kind of discursive field of almost appropriating all of the political will and power within the state solely to himself (Ambrosio 2015; Anceschi 2017; Ibadildin and Pisareva 2020; Isaacs 2010; Kudaibergenova 2020). Or at least this was an attempt to present it as such by the regime. This is why, when many deprived or discriminated groups of people went to protest against unjust moves to remove them from their houses or cut social welfare to mothers and families with multiple children (*mnogodetnie*), they went to the presidential palace, Ak Orda, or addressed their letters directly to Nazarbayev himself, even after he officially resigned from his presidency.[22]

Even though these ubiquitous protests, especially those protesting inadequate welfare provision and cuts, do not represent coherent or institutionalized protest groups, their voices and their responses to the power axis are key, as they represent the systemic approach and dependency on Nazarbayev, whose power and discursive body became

[18] 19971b, Op.1, F. 7, Archive of the first president of Kazakhstan, Almaty, Doklad Prezidentu N.A. Nazarbayevu 'Ob obshestvenno-politicheskoi situatsii v respublike' (perepravleno na rabotu N.Abykayevu), 29 April 1991, p. 12.

[19] Insebayeva and Insebayeva 2021; Kudaibergenova 2019; Laruelle 2014; Tutumlu and Imyarova 2021.

[20] Kudaibergenova 2015; Kulsariyeva 2014; Nazarbayev 2014.

[21] Kudaibergenova 2020.

[22] See a report on these events at www.exclusive.kz/expertiza/daily/124400/.

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the end point of political decision-making in itself during his thirty-year rule. Of course, in reality it is not like that, but as a trend, letters to Nazarbayev overshadow important institutions (whether democratic or not), laws (whether working or not), and formal procedures that are established in place to make the actual state work. And this is what is at the heart of the regime–society relations framework – people feel like it is not the state, but rather the regime, that is accountable for their demands, letters, and discontent.

Kazakhstani politics have been built on the cult of Nazarbayev, who was seen as the father of the nation but also the father who was supposed to take care of every little problem – from welfare payments to impoverished citizens to the large-scale laws and economic programmes that were supposed to make all Kazakhstani citizens prosperous by 2030 – although it has not been successful (Kudaibergenova 2015). Regime–society relations explain the dynamic where the authoritarian cult (as in the case of Asad in Syria or Putin in Russia) or authoritarian norms guide socio-political aspects of everyday life. These include the basic ways and principles of how to behave and what to say that form the corpus of views and norms of what is *appropriate* under any given authoritarian regime (see Kudaibergenova 2021; Wedeen 1999), creating the specific regime of truth connected to its local contexts, for example the Nazarbayevite regime of truth in Kazakhstan. Regime–society relations is a useful tool in explaining how and why authoritarian rule can be normalized on an everyday basis as something routinized and hard to change.

Furthermore, regime–society relations guide the norms and understandings (to build on Glasius 2018) of how things ought to work on the larger political plane, for example, within the state. It dictates how governance is done and what is expected from each individual citizen for the achievement of the vision of the collectively aspired good life. Too often what is asked of the citizens in these conditions is total obedience to the regime's governance and formal and informal rules in return for often fictional and unattainable visions of the bright future the regime paints for its subjects. But this normative order of things and this deeply seated understanding of *appropriate behaviour* (obedience) guide people's everyday lives and their values and aspirations, making the authoritarian regime durable from within.

Regime–society relations can be shaken out of this balance as long as large groups among the public realize that they are not gaining from the

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status quo and resort to mass protests (as discussed in the final chapter). The logic of regime–society relations, however, is hard to break down, as it is rooted and routinized as a 'normal status quo' that some citizens view as set in stone – that some form of authoritarian rule is inevitable or that it is the only way to sustain the country's stability and save it from rampant civil war.[23] But before this happens, the public needs to form alternative way of thinking and imagining the post-regime reality. As I discuss in this book, Nazarbayev's rule was routinized so deeply in people's perception of the political that they found it hard to imagine the post-Nazarbayev era. His cult and normative aspect of his regime were so deeply rooted in people's everyday lives, perceptions, and their aspirations for the future (encapsulated in their understanding of political and economic stability) that they dreaded drastic changes such as the overthrow of the regime and required time to get used to a post-Nazarbayev alternative. The Kazakh Spring was instrumental in providing this alternative and more democratic outlook on how Kazakh politics could work without Nazarbayev.

It was not surprising then that, when the system so concentrated on the role of Nazarbayev's presidency (as an institution and powerful discourse) had to move on from this status quo slowly but surely, it experienced tremendous levels of stress from within and lost track of what was going on outside of its own frames. And this is where an interesting puzzle, already explored extensively in the literature of contemporary authoritarianisms, emerges in Kazakhstan as well. It is the puzzle of to what extent intra-elite authoritarian regime depends on the combination of formal rules and informal practices (Gel'man 2015, 2016; Hale 2014; Ledeneva 2013; Urinboyev 2020). Students and teachers of authoritarian regimes explored in great detail the ways formal institutions (Boix and Svolik 2013; Gandhi and Przeworski 2007; Gandhi 2008), legal systems and the understanding of law and illegality (Botoeva 2019; Urinboyev and Svensson 2013), and formal procedures, albeit not open and free elections, can coexist with

[23] Nazarbayev used civil war as the most fearful outcome of political instability ever since his rise to power in the late 1980s. He helped build the strong discourse of valuing an illusory sense of 'stability' – the fact that the country was relatively peaceful even though there were on-and-off conflicts (between different ethnic groups) that were quickly contained and which he avoided discussing in public.

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different levels and degrees of authoritarianism (most notably in Isaacs 2011; Wedeen 1998, 1999, 2009).

Resilient authoritarian regimes depend on their ability to suppress dissent and opposition by co-optation or complete coercion of rivals, the provision of welfare, and a coercive system in order not to be contested from below. Against them stands the challenge of contentious politics. The emergence of social movements and contentious politics depends on political opportunities and existent social networks capable of constructing new meaning and new solidarities (della Porta and Diani 2001; Tarrow 1998). This relationship between the ruling authoritarian regime (and its elites) and the response from diverse social groups from below demonstrates an important interplay and the way that both of these key players reflect their actions and production of meaning on each other. I would argue that in the post-Nazarbayev era, not everything in the dynamics of power and discursive production depends on the single figure of the dictator, even though the regime attempts to portray it as such and normalize the type of discourse where 'Nazarbayev is everything and everywhere'. The limits of the political are expandable, and many more actors from within the regime – for example, police and other law-enforcement agents (discussed in Chapters 3, 5, 6, and 8), civil activists, anonymous social media channels, and social movement groups – occupy their share of the political will, even if beyond the limits of formal political field, for example, in informal institutions. Even though Kazakhstan continued to exist under the shadow of Nazarbayev, often in bronze,[24] his role diminished after his resignation, and, following the January 2022 protests, the Nazarbayev regime collapsed. As the country is preparing to get rid of the Law on the First President *elbasy* that once solidified Nazarbayev's position within the state for life and prohibited any slander of his name in public, the January 2022 protests demonstrated how many people en masse opposed his cult of personality. They toppled his statue, got rid of his name from his institution, and demanded a full-fledged anti-corruption investigation into his and his family's assets.

[24] Monuments of the former president continued to emerge in different cities of Kazakhstan, most notably in Astana, where there are already four of his statues in public places such as parks and museums, but also in other cities – in Almaty, in the park of the first president, and in Taldyqorgan, the central city of the Almaty region. However, there is no clear evidence of 'popular support' for these monumental projects, which remain largely initiatives led by regime functionaries.

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Qazaq Koktemi: Changing the Rules of the Game

Qazaq Koktemi is a completely new political field because it is identified by (1) lack of formalized oppositional parties; (2) continual outbreaks of protests and ongoing activism instead of previous protests and rallies that were rarer and coincided with specific dates and commemorations; (3) protestors that are made up of non-elite groups; (4) protest groups that aim to organize their movements and rallies across all Kazakhstan and not just in the two major cities of Almaty and Astana (Nur-Sultan); (5) creative and new approaches to protest; and, perhaps most importantly, (6) shifts in collective identities and protestors' agendas and values. Let me address these key elements to situate this field better.

Qazaq Koktemi was an important shift because it speaks against all of the established ways of doing politics. The field in itself is not dependent on coherent and stable structures of political parties or organizations and instead proposes an approach that is a lot more fluid and flexible. People who want to be part of Qazaq Koktemi prefer to call themselves activists, protestors, or active citizens, not members of the formal opposition. The Kazakhstani political field was dominated by the 'opposition' that came from the regime itself, and young activists from the Qazaq Koktemi and Oyan, Qazaqstan movements do not want to be associated with this tainted concept. Many of them expressed the idea that they do not wish to be linked with the 'sell out' opposition and thus need to create their own language for their resistance.

This disassociation plays on different levels – from choosing different tactics for protests and ditching the 'opposition' tradition of protesting only on specific dates of commemorations and instead deciding protest dates by general vote among the groups to the complete denial of any connection to opposition leaders of the past. For example, Mukhtar Ablyazov and his DVK movement, which is now prohibited in Kazakhstan, used rather destructive tactics to claim ownership of any political protest in Kazakhstan by announcing it online as his protest or sending his activist with posters to any rallies organized by Oyan, Qazaqstan or someone else. But Qazaq Koktemi and Oyan, Qazaqstan activists immediately resist all attempts to associate their movement or slogans with those of Ablyazov, as many of them consider him 'as much as a product of Nazarbayev regime as anyone currently sitting in the parliament or enriching

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themselves from the regime-facilitated corruption'.[25] When one activist was called the 'flag-bearer' of the DVK and Ablyazov's opposition agenda, she said that it 'shocked' her and that she 'didn't want to represent DVK, I didn't like, and I still don't like their rhetoric. I understand that any activism is important, but I don't quite understand their agenda – they are here and there but nowhere really, and I don't like and don't support Mukhtar Ablyazov at all'.[26]

In order to avoid this open appropriation of their activism and the limelight that Ablyazov and the old opposition steal from them, all activists within the Qazaq Koktemi field follow a strict branding strategy for their message, from the places where it is published down to the smallest details in design – font, colour, themes – and in their discourses and messages. A lot of it is also heavily supplemented with distinct hashtags, which are tools still not known to the old guard opposition. Also, whenever other politicians or political entrepreneurs try to appropriate their messages for their own gain, all these attempts are negated and made public. This way, the Qazaq Koktemi protestors make a clear demarcation that none of them had a public connection with the regime or came from inside the regime, as Ablyazov and most of the old guard opposition did in the 1990s and the 2000s when they were close allies of President Nazarbayev himself.[27]

Another feature of Qazaq Koktemi movements and protests is that they attempt to form contentions outside the major hubs of Almaty and Astana. The two major cities play an important symbolic role as the country's past and current capitals, but Qazaq Koktemi activism spreads more to the regional hubs, for example, Shymkent and Karaganda, and the Oyan, Qazaqstan movement assists and encourages the formation of its groups in cities outside its main centre in Almaty. The field of activism remains very open also due to the established infrastructure of social media presence and constant channelling via social media and communication. For example, Oyan, Qazaqstan has an open chat on Telegram social media where anyone can join the conversation, and most active members have their own Telegram channels as well as active communication on other social media platforms (discussed in Chapters 3 and 4).

[25] Author's interview with Oyan, Qazaqstan activist, anonymized.
[26] Author's interview with the Qazaq Koktemi activist, July 2020, anonymized.
[27] See Junisbai and Junisbai 2005.

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As I will discuss in Chapters 1 and 2 in more detail, Qazaq Koktemi was born out of the network of young contemporary artists and activists in Almaty, which explains why their protest remained very performative and inspired by their art practices. In Kazakhstan and most of Central Asia (apart from Turkmenistan), the contemporary art field remains a space for socially conscious and socially responsible art production, which is often open to political discussion and critique under the auspices of political art. The makers of the Qazaq Koktemi and Oyan, Qazaqstan are the latest generation of this contemporary art wave. They are more tech-savvy, mostly fluent in English, educated abroad, and come from families and circles with established cultural and social capital. Many of the activists whom I interviewed behind the scenes of the Qazaq Koktemi were my acquaintances, respondents and friends from the time of my art fieldwork that I began with local contemporary artists in 2011. This in part explains two important things – their creative and innovative approach to protest by incorporating visual language (posters, protest street art, performances in courts, etc.) and my access to these very closed and anonymous communities.[28] I discuss this creative approach in more detail in Chapter 2.

The inception of the Qazaq Koktemi field also offered new collective identities and values brought along with the movement for democratizing Kazakhstan anew. They rethink the ideas of civicness, patriotism, and individual contribution to the state rather than the regime, which allowed them to criticize the regime–society framework as the biggest obstacle to democratization. Instead, they vouch for the elites' accountability and call for the Nazarbayev clan to stop considering the whole state of Kazakhstan as their own commercial enterprise from which they constantly extract resources. The slogan 'Kazakhstan without Nazarbayevs' precisely speaks of that idea and of building a more potent civil society and civic culture that can hold the government rather than the regime accountable to society. This rethinking of regime–society relations was not a new idea, as it circulated in the opposition's language throughout the 2000s – the decade when Nazarbayev solidified his rule – even before Nazarbayev's rule was

[28] The emergence of Qazaq Koktemi coincided with one of the most intense art fieldwork periods I was conducting for my book manuscript on protest art in Central Asia.

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substantially questioned in the 2010s by labour unions in western Kazakhstan and economically disadvantaged groups of people who sought to profit from Nazarbayev's promises of a prosperous Kazakhstan and wanted to cash their cheque right away in the form of additional welfare payments or land ownership (e.g., *dol'shiki*, Shanyrak dwellers, etc.). The Kazakh Spring managed to shift these discourses of literally 'consuming the state' and mirroring what Nazarbayev's inner circle had been doing for the thirty years of his rule – extracting, corrupting, and robbing state resources for their personal gain. Instead, they called for citizens to be responsible and accountable for the state they live in and to demand the better governance they deserved as citizens.

This shift in how politics was perceived was remarkable given the regime–society relations that kept the regime in place as a normalized and routinized order of things. The waves of protests during the Kazakh Spring from March 2019 were dedicated to electoral reform and the openness of governing structures. In January 2022, these slogans became loud and clear. The more organized protestors in western Kazakhstan demanded the complete removal of the regime and the introduction of democratic norms and open, contested elections, while the less organized groups of protestors in Almaty demanded similar changes but under the slogan 'New Kazakhstan without Nazarbayev and his old elites'. So the public responded clearly to the shifts in framing the political and valuing their freedoms above the stability of the political regime. This is one of the biggest lessons to learn from the January 2022 protests for the political actors in Kazakhstan.

The Tokayev regime's swift response to this shift was the constitutional referendum and the slow removal of Nazarbayev from the key positions he acquired during his thirty-year rule, including the cancellation of the Law on the First President (discussed further in Chapter 1) that was instrumental in extending Nazarbayev's institutionalized powers. Moreover, Tokayev's regime also proposed a state programme borrowing from the demands on the streets, calling it 'New Kazakhstan' (introduced in March 2022). This interplay between the regime, which has to quickly adapt and respond to the claims and slogans of civil society, and the sporadic protesting groups is a significant shift for Kazakhstani authoritarianism and a conceptual insight for the study of non-democratic politics. As a conceptual

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insight, it demonstrates that authoritarian regimes and the realities they create are dynamic, complex, and often contradict their own rules of the game, but they are also highly attentive and responsive to the voices of the new and highly globalized civil society. The globalized outlook of the Kazakh Spring activists is something inescapable, as they are the generation that is more fluent in global social media networks than in the old Soviet 'authoritative' language[29] of the sort that the old guards (of both regime and opposition) continue living in.

What to Expect from This Book and Why You Need to Read It

This book is about a contemporary revolutionary moment, a type of temporal snapshot of the tectonic shifts of post-Sovietness. I perceive post-Sovietness not only as a space (geographical, cultural, discursive) with all its powers and inherent post–Cold War marginalization but also as a moment in history that is rapidly dying with Russia's colonial war in Ukraine. The Nazarbayev regime was in power as the dominant facet of post-Sovietness, but the emergence of Qazaq Koktemi and protest movements within it signals important changes in that powerful discursive axis. In explaining this argument of the new revolutionary wave, I in no way aim to evaluate it, and I certainly try to avoid applying the templates of 'success' or 'failure'[30] that are often ascribed

[29] See Yurchak 2006.

[30] Echoing the voices of the many colleagues and friends who sustained the Bloody January protests in diaspora (most notably in Berlin and Paris) and fully acknowledging the input of all those who fought for democratization (and not the violent mobs), I prefer to call this phenomenon a 'stolen revolution'. This way we can pay tribute to all those who went to the squares to voice their civic position and all those who tragically died fighting for freedom. I also believe that the Bloody January protests have many different narratives that happened in parallel to one another – there were organized crime groups who successfully hijacked the peaceful protests and perpetuated violence; there were also looters and criminals who took advantage of the chaos and broke into banks, restaurants, and shops (in an organized or sporadic manner); finally, there were peaceful protestors and those protestors who were so outraged that they resorted to different forms of violence, for example, storming official buildings, setting cars and public buildings (Nazarbayev's party headquarters, local municipal offices, Nazarbayev's monuments) on fire, or demanding the immediate demolition of these objects. Our story of these tragic days in early January 2022 needs to be researched and written from all of these different standpoints, and I hope there will be more work emerging on these themes soon (especially Daniyar Moldabekov's book on Bloody January told from an eyewitness perspective, soon to be published in Kazakhstan). The story of the

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to other similar waves of protests, for example, with the Euromaidan in Ukraine, Bolotnaia and consequent marches in Russia, the 2020 standoff in Belarus, or the array of Rose, Orange, and Tulip Revolutions prior to that. In fact, I am trying my best to avoid these simplifications that certainly were written with the best intentions to make sense of the complexity that post-Sovietness[31] represents as a phenomenon perhaps still less known to us than the Soviet Union itself used to be.

My aim is to focus on the description of the complexity on the ground, to tap into the abundant field of thoughts, aspirations, values, visions, and creative forces that drives many of my compatriots to imagine an alternative to the regime they never existed without. Many of my respondents were born during Nazarbayev's rule and never experienced the full social and political reality *without* him until very recently. Their voices, agency, and literally their bodies were embedded within this discourse of Nazarbayev's Kazakhstan. Yet it does not stop them from radically reimagining it. On the contrary, they take their resistance stance from this embeddedness within the dictatorship.

The solid authoritarian rule born out of and established on the ruins of the very distinct empire that appropriated communist ideals and made millions (including my respondents' parents) live in the unknown utopia is a complex world of its own. Add globalization, rapid neoliberalization, the opening of borders, access to global dialogues through education, social media, and the almost-complete negation of the conventional media by this generation of independence, and you will get a conglomerate of even more complex yet exciting identities, ideas, movements, and actions. Thus, the Kazakh Spring/Qazaq Koktemi is a product of diverse networks, complexities, and temporalities – of the Soviet and post-Soviet, global, neoliberal, nationalist and historical, decolonial and queer revolutions and dialogues. Above all, it is a phenomenon that is in constant conversation and dialogue with other global movements and protests waves happening due to the similar and acute realizations of inequality, lack of freedom and

stolen revolution that this book is partly telling is told from the narratives of those who started it as a peaceful manifestation of their civic and political positions and who refused violence.

[31] I continue to view this term critically but here it is written to simplify the historical process – 'post-soviet' here means 'post-1991' period in Kazakhstan. I fully acknowledge the limitations of this term.

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representation. Thus, this book is not only about the Kazakh Spring or Kazakhstan per se – it is also about the global trends and responses to the growing inequality and disempowerment highlighted even more through the autocratic context.

Another thing that the reader should keep in mind is that this book is written through the numerous accounts of those who protested openly on the streets or met in private settings under strict security and anonymity measures. A lot of these interviews are anonymized for the security of my respondents, who were willing to talk despite the very real dangers and uncertainties of the repressive machine that they face. My aim was to write out the processes from the perspectives not only of the eyewitnesses but of the makers of the revolution at its inception. Thus, the book follows numerous and often long narratives from the direct speech of the actor. I combined these interviews with archival data and the interviews I collected in 2012–14 and 2015–19 fieldwork with the opposition old guard and their reflections on their time. I believe this combination of narratives and reflections is useful, as it demonstrates Kazakhstani politics as an ever-changing field even though it is often seen as 'stagnant' to outsiders, as much as an ocean once seemed 'pacific' to its explorers but in fact was far from it.

This book is written from the position of fieldwork at *home* – I am no alien to the Kazakh steppe or its Alucobond urban jungles. On the contrary, as a writer and researcher, I am the direct product of that space and a particular Kazakhstani time in the 1990s and the early 2000s, being a child of independence myself. While my fieldwork and connection to the circles of activists in Kazakhstan lasted for several years for the project on art activism that I commenced in 2011, I started consciously collecting interviews with the Qazaq Koktemi and Oyan, Qazaqstan and other protest movements activists from January 2020 until 2022 with some reflections in 2023, and I closely followed the development of protests from March 2019. That said, I was never part of the Oyan, Qazaqstan movement, although many of my friends and acquaintances were, which made my access to the interview pool much easier and allowed for the establishment of the needed trust in the interview process. This trust I was very careful not to abuse. Many more books should be written on Indigenous methodologies and on the ways researchers can and should approach sensitive contexts, clauses of confidentiality, and discussions of some of the most horrific moments of activists' lives – of the mental and physical torture by the

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repressive regimes they live and operate under. And thankfully, many of these books have already been written, and I have followed their words of wisdom.[32]

Along with thirty interviews,[33] I conducted digital ethnography from the start of the Qazaq Koktemi in March 2019 until late 2022 (post-January protests). Digital ethnography is the method of gathering data in the form of the study of social media pages, commentary, and visual and textual content online. It also can involve online interviews, where 'in digital ethnography, we are often in mediated contact with participants rather than in direct presence' (Pink, Horst, Postill, et al. 2016: 21). Almost all my interviews with activists were conducted online through their preferred social media platforms – often with the heaviest encryptions and security – but some also on Zoom. I have also studied the Oyan, Qazaqstan Telegram chat, which I joined in April 2020, numerous Instagram accounts, including Rukh2k19, the official account of the Qazaq Koktemi, and Oyan, Qazaqstan's official Instagram account, and diverse social media accounts of all my respondents and many independent media outlets. Our interaction also included live stories on Instagram, when in the summer of 2020 Oyan, Qazaqstan activists hosted several live Q&A sessions with anyone interested in their activism. I have analysed the August 2020 televised trial of the activist Asya Tulesova and participated in chat and Zoom discussions with activists about the trial. This digital ethnography was in part dictated by the tactics of the Qazaq Koktemi field, where most of the activists preferred to communicate their messages online where state censorship could reach not them but also where many of them could remain anonymous due to personal choices and circumstances. In other words, the context of the 'digital revolution' that Qazaq Koktemi proposed also pushed me to move

[32] Smith 2021 in particular was a very useful guide. See also Denzin, Lincoln, and Smith 2008.

[33] All of the interviews were conducted with the consent of the respondents; some of them were interviewed twice, and I have written notes and transcripts of all the recordings. Due to the start of the pandemic, some of the interviews were conducted online via Telegram and other platforms, some over Zoom. For the purposes of confidentiality and due to the risk of further harassment of the activists, I anonymized most of the interviews, although some of the incidents (imprisonments, attacks, police harassment) would be familiar to those who were closely following the events. All interviews were transcribed and translated solely by me to avoid any breach of privacy.

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fieldwork online. In August 2021, in July and August 2022, and again in January 2023 (for the first year anniversary of the Bloody January protests), I returned to Kazakhstan and met with many of my respondents in person to discuss some more details of our interviews and to confirm their choices for full or partial confidentiality in the final publication.

In the book, I took the approach of describing and analysing the complexity in the words of those who make it happen but also analysing the contexts in which this complexity happens. Telling the story from a participant's own perspective and in their own words does it more justice and allows for further evaluation of these positions and meanings in the future when everything will eventually become history.

Telling this story from an eyewitness perspective, the book consists of eight chapters, following the logic of the way Qazaq Koktemi developed in the first three years of its existence. Following the January 2022 mass protests, which I studied closely and actively commented on, I added the final chapter (co-written with Marlene Laruelle) to focus just on these events and their aftermath. In some ways, these chapters also follow a chronological development of events and the contexts that influenced them.

In Chapter 1, 'What Is the Kazakh Spring?', I contextualize the authoritarian systematization of the political field that made it so inaccessible to the non-regime elites and newcomers. I argue that this context of authoritarian rules of the game negatively influenced the established opposition and the regime elites on the eve of Nazarbayev's resignation. None of them were ready to react to such drastic changes in the political field. As a result, the established and formalized opposition disintegrated following a number of scandals, and the remaining politicians from the opposition had to comply with the populist calls to sustain their potential electorate. Within Nazarbayev's regime, the elites remained stagnant and disoriented; they focused too much on what was happening within the regime itself and did not manage to meet the growing societal discontent and protests. These conditions, on the one hand, left newly elected President Tokayev in an uneasy situation where he continuously had to deal with crises. But on the other hand, this type of intra-elite concentration within the regime offered a unique opportunity for new unknown political forces to emerge in the public sphere. This is how the Kazakh Spring was born as an alternative political field of opportunities.

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In Chapter 2, 'Who Are Oyan, Qazaqstan?', I discuss how the protests of April 2019 initiated by the Kazakh Spring activists led to a growing sense of injustice and the necessity to protest even more. This chapter is devoted to the contextualization and explanation of why and how the protest movement of Oyan, Qazaqstan emerged in the corridors of the courts on the days of the activists' trials. The paradox of the authoritarian regime is revealed in these contexts. Still unable to adapt to the new conditions or see how the socio-political landscape has changed since Nazarbayev's resignation, his authoritarian regime machine continued to operate in the same repressive manner by arresting and harassing the dissidents and protestors. Unlike previous periods, protestors' arrests fuelled even more unrest and led to the organization of the protest movement Oyan, Qazaqstan, which publicly launched their programme to democratize Kazakhstan in June 2019.

In Chapter 3, 'Deconstructing *Vlast*'', I dwell on regime–society relations instead of the classic 'state–society' relations. In doing so, I argue that in the perceptions of many citizens under authoritarian conditions, the state and political power or regime (*vlast*' in Russian) is represented by the authoritarian regime and its main dictator. I further contend in this chapter that to analyse these relations between the regime and wider society, we need to study how these power relations are perceived, understood, and practised in a given case. Thus, the chapter represents an in-depth analysis of activists' and citizens' perceptions of their positions vis-à-vis the regime, the lack of the rule of law, and overall conditions of socio-political insecurity. In these conditions, the dictatorial 'stability' of everyday life and the established system of values under dictatorship – for example, economic capital, certain incentives to normalize corruption, and so on – represent a crucial backbone to regime stability, where coercion is not the prime and immediate mechanism available to the autocratic elites. The logic of the Kazakh Spring and Oyan, Qazaqstan activists is to fight against institutionalized authoritarianism and this embedded system of authoritarian values and perceptions of 'power' (*vlast'*) as something embodied in the figures of autocrats. This shift to fighting against authoritarian values and perceptions on the meaning-making level is a very new feature of the protest waves of the Kazakh Spring, and it potentially makes it more viable and sustainable.

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In Chapter 4, 'Performing the State, Performing the Protest', I discuss the digital revolution context of the Kazakh Spring. In the absence of viable and independent media (print, radio, or television), the protestors had to move their communication, outreach, and engagement entirely online. Kazakhstan is one of the most digitalized post-Soviet nations and enjoys many Instagram (up to 9 million users out of the total population of 17 million) and other social media users. The Kazakh Spring managed to politicize this social media landscape and help the emergent protests even on less politicized platforms such as Instagram. The first pandemic year, subsequent lockdowns, and the full-fledged public health crisis, growing corruption, and the resulting highest peak of mortality in the summer of 2020 exacerbated the digital revolution in Kazakhstan. Political protestors were involved in creating online databases for Covid deaths that the state tried to hide and created the space not only for digital national mourning but also for online investigations of the corruption associated with the Covid crisis. I argue that through these processes, Kazakh Spring activists were able to unite many citizens who felt angry and disoriented by the circumstances of this crisis. This chapter also focuses on the online trial of activist Asya Tulesova in August 2020, which had to be held on Zoom due to the lockdowns. Tulesova was arrested in June 2020 during an unsanctioned rally, and her public trial (which was live-streamed on YouTube) inspired further digital and in-person protests and calls against injustice and the inadequacy of the law-enforcement agencies. In this chapter, I argue that the events of the summer of 2020 led to the strengthening of the Kazakh Spring and the creation of the imagined digital community in Kazakhstan, where bonds and feelings of collective solidarity were formed through social media and online channels.

In Chapter 5, 'Generation Q and Decolonizing *Alash*', I discuss the use of language, colonial heritage, and the rethinking of its legacy in the context of the nationalizing regime imposed by Nursultan A. Nazarbayev. I argue that the constructed divide between the Kazakh- and Russian-speaking political audiences no longer works as a divide for the Qazaq Koktemi activists, who are actively embracing bilingualism not as an unattainable aspiration but as a living reality of post-independence. Qazaq Koktemi activists can be also dubbed 'Generation Q' as they strive to return to the Latinization of the Kazakh language (given that Q represents the Kazakh language sound 'Қ' better than the Stalin-era established Cyrillic script). In this

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chapter, I also discuss how activists read decolonial theory and use it in their activism, why their main slogans, names, and titles of their projects come from the oeuvre of the Kazakh pre-Soviet movement of *Alash* and its writers – for example the 'Oyan, Qazaq' poem of Myrzhaqyp Dulatov – and how these well-known discourses are changed and adapted to the contemporary Qazaq realities. I also discuss how Qazaq Koktemi as a field allows us to rethink the nationalistic stigma that remained a Soviet legacy.

In Chapter 6, 'The Public Square and the Body under Authoritarian Pressures', I return to the symbolic importance of Brezhnev Square in Almaty and the 1986/2011 commemoration of the victims of the Soviet- and Nazarbayev-era violent crackdowns on the protests. The December 1986 protests in Soviet Alma-Ata and the violent repression in December 2011 of the long stand-off in the labour dispute in the industrial oil town of Zhanaozen remain focal points for the claims of the Qazaq Koktemi activists, who were able to reshape the old opposition's agenda over these events. In this chapter, I make the body and the public square the prime focus of the discussion. Oyan, Qazaqstan activists stress that the unsanctioned December rallies in the same square in Almaty are one of their principal events of the whole year, planned in advance. They view it as a crucial representation of the physical protest. Through these rallies though, they also fall victim to the regime's unchanged tactics of violence and control over the body. I focus on the inhumane aspects of the police tactic of kettling, used against activists in public rallies in 2021.

In Chapter 7, 'Queering the Public Sphere', I discuss the important shift to queering and discuss how queerness and 'gender equality' become the new and acutely visible paradigms of the Qazaq Koktemi. Never did any movement pay so much attention to this agenda. And rarely in the contemporary history of Kazakhstan did protest movements call out openly the double oppression of the regime, through its patriarchal and authoritarian nature of governing. In this chapter, I also focus on the ideas of class inequality. Dwelling further on my argument about Qazaq Koktemi representing the fading of the post-Soviet era, I also analyse in detail the women's rally of 8 March 2021 in Almaty and the many actors united behind it in the call for de-Sovietizing and de-stereotyping this important day of mobilization. I believe that the 2021 Women's March in particular opened many eyes to the fact that there is a vibrant plurality of views and activist forms within Qazaq Koktemi

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and that these forms are no longer chained to the old paradigms of the 'gender' question à la Nazarbayev, with tokenism towards female politicians and persistent sexism in the political domain.

Chapter 8, 'Making Sense of the Bloody January', that I co-authored with Marlene Laruelle, is fully dedicated to the January 2022 protests. The chapter focuses on the detailed accounts of what triggered the mass protests and on the intra-elite problems that exacerbated the problems of inequality.

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